

Overcoming polarization

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Body

As inflation rises and climate crises multiply, it's become abundantly clear the Canadian economy needs a real, post-pandemic plan for growth - one that prepares us for a post-globalization and post-carbon future.

The need to act on climate change - and the desire to build a more just and equal Canada - simply can't negate the requirement for a plan to create long-term sustained economic growth. We won't have the necessary conditions for climate action or investment in social policy without the growth to pay for it.

Yet, Canada is uniquely positioned to do both, and do it well.

Our strength has always been precisely that: our ability to invest in economic growth without undermining our social policy agenda. But in a world that's increasingly polarized between populism and progressivism, we're losing some of our collective understanding that spurring growth allows for social progress.

The divides will only deepen if new Conservative Leader Pierre Poilievre continues to run to the populist arm of the party and away from the big-tent politics and economics that have defined most Conservative prime ministers of years past.

The Tories aren't alone in abandoning the centre. Earlier this year, the Liberals struck a big-spending deal with the NDP to stay in power and build new social programs - a supply-and-confidence agreement that neglects the economic-growth agenda Canada requires.

Caught between grievance and entitlement, we lose the civic space for complex policy solutions. As Parliament resumes, our political leaders face massive challenges that demand more nuanced debate than the current tenor of the discourse affords.

Climate change is already ravaging our planet, with massive human and economic impacts. Deadly flooding in Pakistan has followed a summer of fatal heat waves, drought and wildfires in Europe and North America.

The pandemic created supply chain challenges that have become as endemic as the virus; inflationary pressures are challenging businesses, families and governments around the world; the war in Ukraine shattered decades of global stability; and the rules-based international trade order has been upended. The foundations of the globalized economy are the most unstable they've been since the fall of the Iron Curtain, and it could easily get worse before it gets better.

In Canada, these global realities are compounded by the simple fact that we must both confront climate change and find a real, stable replacement for the nearly eight per cent of our national GDP that relies on oil and gas. The lack

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of such a plan stems from the sheer complexity of the problem, the lack of political motivation to do the substantive policy work, and the fact civil society hasn't done the hard work to generate cogent solutions either.

Nuclear energy is one potential solution in want of a political champion: the nuclear fuel cycle starts and ends in Canada, and yet this emissions-free source of power has yet to be fully embraced as a long-term energy solution to power the cities, electric vehicles and businesses of tomorrow.

It's not that we can't do it. Investing in economic growth can be good politics; just look at how Ontario Progressive Conservative Premier Doug Ford and Liberal Prime Minister Justin Trudeau worked together to secure the future of electric vehicle manufacturing in Canada - a move backed as loudly by labour unions like Unifor as it was by auto-manufacturing giants like GM.

It's good news for Canada, but it only secured the future of an industry upon which we already rely. When it comes to facilitating new business growth, the conditions required by businesses both small and large remain elusive, largely thanks to the political divides of the moment.

Hyperpolarization in our political debate rewards a mode of simple slogans rather than the hard work of substantive policy generation. Ultimately, civil society must demand better. Because politicians will always respond to the market of voters that are out there.

The solution requires all of us in civil society to put substantive issues in front of political leaders, in opinion pages such as this one, on front pages, on the figurative front burners. We must say we want these issues dealt with. The conditions are already manifesting themselves in voters' collective anxiety around economic issues: inflation, slow growth, interest rates.

If our politics are going to lean toward the simplistic, then a sophisticated civil society must engage and say, "Don't just give us slogans - give us smart solutions." As leaders of businesses and unions and academia, we need to work with government to create economic growth as the underlying condition required to support the climate change action and social policies of tomorrow.

It's not simple. It won't fit on a bumper sticker. But it's urgent work that requires coming together, not growing further apart.

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